

# COUNCILWOMAN O'CONNOR'S

## WOODBURY HISTORY LESSON

### EDUCATION, SOCIAL AWARENESS, AND ADVOCACY - THE MOVEMENT TO END SCHOOL SEGREGATION IN WOODBURY

In today's era of advanced multi-media communication, we are able to regularly connect internationally with the simple press of a button. Even a global quarantine failed to separate us from each other. Instead, it encouraged innovation, allowing students and educators to remain in touch and organized.

Therefore, it can be hard to imagine living during a time when races were legally divided in all aspects of life, including education. The shadow of blatant discrimination cast by Jim Crow laws still impacts the history of African Americans in our community, today.

In the early 1950s, there were clear dividing lines that determined where a family settled in our 2.10 square mile city.

"The line of segregation was Barber Avenue in Southern Woodbury," recalls resident Kirk Kersey.\* "Very few blacks lived north of Barber Avenue. Uptown Woodbury was for white people and blacks could only be in that area at designated times."

Calvin Ferguson\*\*, who attended the Carpenter Street School shared a few of these areas. "African Americans lived in the area extending from McDonald's (201 Evergreen) to Barber Avenue and Broad as well as from the Armory to the border of Deptford."

Amidst adversity, the community was close-knit. The churches were the beacons of the African American neighborhoods. Not only did they offer spiritual

### SEG-RE-GA-TION

#### Noun

*The enforced separation of different racial groups in a country, community or establishment.*



nourishment, but it was, as Kersey reminisced, they were "the source for people to gain and share information."

The Bethel AME Church on Carpenter Street provided meals and programs in the summer for children. Also, for a time, under the leadership of Reverend Thomas, old Bethlehem Baptist was used as a daycare center during the day, and dances were held on Friday evenings.

Even shopping was segregated. Broad Street was the center of commerce for Caucasians while around Carpenter Street was the location where African Americans would shop for everything from groceries to clothing and shoes.

Gloria Holmes, in an interview with NJ.com, explained that the Woodbury she grew up in was dramatically different than what it is now. As part of a Woodbury African American oral history project she helped spearhead, Holmes talked about the challenges she faced. Once, she recalled, her sister was refused service at a lunch counter on Broad Street.

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As an eighth-grade student in the Carpenter Street School, she and her classmates were informed that they would be attending the newly integrated Woodbury High School. "That was horrendous," she told the reporter of being plunged into the unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcoming new environment. She "was taught only by black teachers until the ninth grade when I started high school."

Nationally, the call for school integration increased in 1954 when the landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka) ruled that the U.S. state laws establishing racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional, "even if the segregated schools are otherwise equal in quality." All over the country, protesters called for the end of segregated schools.

It didn't happen overnight and not everyone was convinced that this was in their best interests. Yes, African American parents wanted the best education and opportunities for their children, but some worried whether the white teachers would treat their children well in an integrated school. And what of the fate African American teachers that had been steadfastly educating their children-would their jobs be secure?

Fortunately, New Jersey provided protection for these teachers. The State initiated a change in the law that protected the jobs of black teachers – "calming a huge worry in the black community that integration would cost its role models their jobs." (Ledger State archives).

Holmes pursued her education at Morgan State University, however, when she returned to Woodbury with her teaching degree, she explained, "Woodbury High School wouldn't hire me. I had to work at the Carpenter Street School until Woodbury High School was integrated." Holmes became one of the first African American teachers at Woodbury High School.

### REALITY DIDN'T FOLLOW THE WRITTEN WORD.

In 1963, the Carpenter Street School was still segregated, and the strengthening voice for civil rights reform was heard in Woodbury.

The June 12th, 1963 assassination of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers, shot in his own driveway by a white supremacist, inspired the "March of Mourning" sponsored by the Gloucester County Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Two hundred and seventy-four people assembled at the Bethlehem Baptist Church and the Carpenter Street School and marched to the steps of the county building.

Reverend Charles Thomas proclaimed, "We must band together to delete this hideous monster hiding under the cloak of segregation."

Calling for change, Thomas "urged Negroes to actively seek jobs in Woodbury." He instructed them, "start at City Hall and then go up and down Broad Street, seeking employment in every place of business." Civic groups urged residents."

*Pictured Below: Medgar Evers*



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In late August of 1963, Reverend Thomas and NAACP leaders counseled citizens to register to vote. "If you have an ounce of dignity I'm going to ask you to register." He proclaimed, "It is the only way we can change the structure that controls Woodbury."

The Board of Education was brought under fire due to the continued segregation of the Carpenter Street School.

Under the leadership of the Gloucester County Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Second Ward Citizens Committee, residents began picketing the Board of Education building on Broad Street for ten days to protest the fact that "the Carpenter Street School is still segregated."

With the 1963 school session about to begin, the African American leadership urged all parents to register at the three predominately white elementary schools.

As part of the city's integration plan, effective that day, the 6th-grade class was being transferred to the Evergreen School and the 4th grade to West End School. With those 56 students leaving, there still remained 110 Carpenter Street students that were attempting to register in the city.

The Woodbury Daily Times and the Courier Post were on hand on September 9, 1963, to document the peaceful but purposeful assembly as the parents joined their children in attempting to register at the other elementary schools.

Anticipating resistance to the registration request, contingency plans were in place for the teachers to set up night classes for the students and the 16 aids to babysit.



—Courier-Post Photo by Arthur C. Jarvis

**WAITING TO REGISTER** at the West End Memorial Elementary School, Woodbury, Rev. Charles E. Thomas, pastor of the local Bethlehem Baptist Church, stands with his arm around the shoulders of his son, Vincent, 7.

At the end of the day, only 7 students were allowed to register and the rest were instructed to go to the district school that they were assigned. Debates, pickets, and negotiations continued after the memorable first day of classes in 1963.

Woodbury citizen, Edith Spencer, submitted an editorial to the Woodbury Times the following day. In closing, she stated, "Wake up Citizens of Woodbury. The Time is NOW!"

The Carpenter Street School was closed in 1965.

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Students entered the front door to register and were escorted out a side door by Woodbury police.  
(Courier Post September 9, 1963)

*Footnote: Another notable casualty of integration was the closing of The Bordentown School, which was founded in 1886 by Reverend Walter A Rice, a college-educated, former enslaved African American and minister with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. In 1894 it was taken over by the State of New Jersey and renamed the "Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth."*

Today, we strive to be a more cohesive city, remembering the pains of the past so that we can move forward toward the future.

"What started as a place for the underprivileged grew to become an elite school with a parade of celebrity visitors ranging from Albert Einstein to Eleanor Roosevelt. That dynamic—an elite school for black youth to learn academics and trades in the middle of the segregated era." Wrote researcher Scott Moore in the Community News on January 31, 2019.

The boarding school for sixth through twelfth-grade boys and girls was often nicknamed the "Tuskegee of the North," after Booker T. Washington's famous Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama.

With the Supreme Court decision in 1954 that declared that 'state-mandated "separate but equal" policy for public schools was unconstitutional, The Bordentown School was closed by the State of New Jersey in 1955 because it was unable to attract white students and thus remained a segregated institution. Bordentown's demise was also brought about in part by New Jersey civil rights advocates who urged the school's closing arguing that a racially segregated institution had no place in the Garden State." ([www.blackpast.org](http://www.blackpast.org))

An important institution of education closed – but not before graduating leaders that would go on to make a difference for their community and their country.

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Students work in the Bordentown Manual Training and Industrial School print shop (left) and students assemble in front of the school (right).. (Photo courtesy of the New Jersey State Archives, Department of State.)

A special thank you to the **Gloucester County Historical Society Library** for the wealth of information that went into this history lesson as well as the personal recollections of residents **Gloria Holmes, Kirk Kersey, and Calvin Ferguson**.

- Kirk Kersey grew up in both Woodbury and Jericho, NJ. He was part of the Woodbury auxiliary police force. Today, he safely helps our children cross the street at the Barber Avenue intersection.

\*\* **Charles Ferguson**: attended the Carpenter Street School. He became a history teacher in 1968, was a guidance counselor, the assistant principal at Woodbury High School from 1974-1989, and served as the Principal of West End Elementary School from 1989-2001.

\*\*\* **Gloria Holmes taught in public schools for 47 years before retiring in 2004. She was instrumental in preserving the memories of the residents who grew up in Woodbury through her work with the WOODBURY AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT.**